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INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BELGRADE 001553

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TAGS: PGOV PREL PHUM SR

SUBJECT: SERBIA: RADICAL PARTY MAYOR MAJA GOJKOVIC READY TO JUMP SHIP

REF: BELGRADE 1552

Classified By: DCM Jennifer Brush, reasons 1.4 (b,d)

Summary

¶1. (C) Novi Sad Mayor Maja Gojkovic of the Serbian Radical Party (SRS) confided to the DCM that she planned to break from the party and run for president in 2012. She said she differed from the party leadership in her orientation to the west, where Serbia's destiny lay. She outlined her efforts to build Novi Sad's economic prosperity and dismissed her more liberal political rivals in Vojvodina, claiming she was more popular with the people. She avoided directly answering questions about the consequences of, and her moral responsibility for, the Radicals' alleged war crimes during the wars of the 1990s. DCM's meeting with Gojkovic was unusual, it was first meeting at this level with a high-ranking representative of the Radical Party, the party of indicted war criminal Vojislav Seselj. DCM met with Gojkovic in her role as mayor of Serbia's second largest city, and because of her reputation for honesty, competence and ambition. Gojkovic is charismatic and influential and talks the talk of a democrat, but is she truly reformed? End Summary.

Rumors of a Split with the Radicals are True

¶2. (SBU) Novi Sad's Mayor, Maja Gojkovic, a member of the Serbian Radical Party (SRS) met with the DCM on November 14 in city hall. Gojkovic accepted the DCM's request for a meeting readily and appeared eager to share her views on the Radical Party, her political ambitions and the potential for Novi Sad's economic development.

¶3. (C) Gojkovic confided that she planned to split from the Radical party and run for president in 2012. She would not run in the next elections because the time for her was not right. Referring to the failed presidential campaign of French Socialist candidate Segolene, Gojkovic said, "it's not yet time for the year of the woman." Gojkovic said her biggest accomplishment to date was winning election as mayor, and referring to another apparent role model said, "Rudolph Giuliani has greater ambitions too."

¶4. (C) Gojkovic confirmed that she and Radical Party President and indicted crimes criminal Vojislav Seselj had "exchanged nasty words" a few years ago and had not been in touch since. EU integration was essential for Serbia's future, she said, but admitted her party was split on the issue, some thinking the Russians would make better friends. Average Serbs wanted economic prosperity, she said, and would be shocked if they understood the implications of a relationship with Russia. DCM noted that other emerging East European democracies might say that Russian friendship had not worked well for them. Although the Radicals retained a plurality of the electorate (31-33%), they were stuck as a perpetual opposition party, and Deputy President Tomislav Nikolic had no chance of winning the next presidential election (reftel). In response to DCM's question of how widely known Gojkovic's views were on Radical electoral prospects, he replied, "it's nothing I haven't already told Nikolic."

Princess Maja

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15. (SBU) Gojkovic asserted that Novi Sad, with an excellent infrastructure and geographical location needed only greater foreign investment to realize its potential. Novi Sad's EXIT Festival and other cultural events already attracted many foreign tourists, and the city was becoming a center of cultural tourism. She was planning a zoning scheme to develop a techno park for Novi Sad's manufacturing sector on the outskirts of the city, in order to leave the charming center of town intact. According to Gojkovic, the U.S. magazine "Fortune" was scheduled to interview her the next day and she seemed flattered that the magazine had insisted the interview be with her; no other city official would be acceptable.

16. (SBU) She dismissed the claim by League of Vojvodina Social Democrats (LSV) head Nenad Canak that a Radical had won only because an influx of refugees in recent years from the wars of the 1990s had changed the political landscape-- the refugees were not registered to vote. The Democratic Party (DS) and LSV could not accept that they had made mistakes. Her DS predecessor had been in office eight years and had done nothing for the city. The average citizen recognized the good work she had done, even if they did not support her party. She said she was recognized as the "people's princess of Vojvodina." She and Canak, who was the son of the city's mayor during the Tito era and thus tainted by communist roots, would never agree on political ideas, regardless of their party affiliations.

Let Bygones be Bygones

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17. (SBU) Gojkovic did not respond directly to questions about moral responsibility for the Radicals' war crime activity during the wars

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in Bosnia and Kosovo in the 1990s. Instead, she discussed the party's roots in Nikola Pasic's People's Radical Party, in which her grandfather had been active, between the two World Wars, "the last time Serbia was well led," according to Gojkovic. The party had always taken the role of protecting national pride. Gojkovic, who was a founder of the post-Communist Radical Party in 1991, said the past was the past and she needed to focus on the future. "Let us not focus on placing blame." Seselj would probably be convicted, she said. But, it was strange to her, as a lawyer, that ICTY prosecutors could argue that he was guilty simply for making statements that might have influenced others to commit war crimes.

Biography

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18. (U) Maja Gojkovic was born May 22, 1963 and raised in Novi Sad. She received a law degree from the University of Novi Sad in 1987, passed the bar exam in 1989, and then went to work in the family law firm. She was one of the founders in 1991 of the Serbian Radical Party, serving as vice president from 1991 until 2006. She was part of Seselj's legal team at the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) from 2003-2006. She was a member of the Parliament of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in 1991; a member of the Vojvodina Parliament from 1996-2000, Minister without Portfolio in the Serbian Government from 1998-1999; and member of the Federal Parliament of the State Union of Serbia and Montenegro from 1999-2004.

19. (U) Gojkovic beat the Democratic Party incumbent mayor, Borislav Novakovic in the first direct election for that post in 2004. Earlier this year, Gojkovic declared she would be willing to run for president, sparking a controversy within the party and straining her relations with party leaders Seselj and Nikolic. Gojkovic is not married. She told the DCM she was providing support to a disadvantaged child, whose mother was a drug addict and whose father was "in Somalia or France or somewhere," but Serbian law currently did not permit single women to adopt.

Comment

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¶10. (C) Maja Gojkovic is a colorful, charismatic politician. She is obviously a player (and knows it). She was relaxed with the DCM and interested in establishing good rapport. She is eager for the acceptance of the west and looks and sounds like a good democrat. If she does form her own party, she could translate her success as mayor of a lively, prosperous city into the Presidency of Serbia, offering an interesting alternative to the Serbian electorate.

¶11. (C) Despite these encouraging signs, she is a founding member of a heinous party and part of its bloody past, yet she does not take responsibility for the crimes her colleagues in the party committed in the name of Serbian nationalism. She defended Seselj in the Hague until they had their falling out. The question remains--is she a reformed Radical, or mostly an opportunist, assuming the mantle of democracy and capitalism because she realizes that her party cannot provide her with the platform to fulfill her greatest ambitions? Whatever the case, her star seems to be rising. She may have confided in the DCM only to get a feeling for the level of support she might expect from the United States when she makes a break with the Radicals, but we will look for future opportunities to build on that dialogue. End Comment.

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